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BODY:

In September 1973 I was appointed to Saudi Arabia's Foreign Liaison Bureau, which was mandated to work with friendly intelligence agencies, including the CIA. From that year until Aug. 31, 2001, when I stepped down as director of the General Intelligence Department (GID), I was at the forefront of my government's war on terrorism.

In the 1970s and '80s, the CIA and the GID worked together to combat communist-inspired terrorist organizations around the world. We shared information on Abu Nidal and the various Palestinian groups, as well as the Red Brigades in Italy, the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany, the Japanese Red Army and many others that threatened U.S.-Saudi interests. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, the U.S. and Saudi governments entered into a joint covert program with Pakistan to help the Afghan people resist the invaders. In my years at the GID, I experienced firsthand many times of difficulty between our countries. During these periods, the United States and Saudi Arabia maintained close ties and discussed our differences frankly and openly. We often agreed to disagree, but we always recognized the mutual benefits of partnership. I also experienced the high points in the relationship -- for example, the disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel and Syria and Israel in 1975 and 1976; neither would have taken place without Saudi-U.S. cooperation. Nor would the increase in Saudi oil production in the mid-'80s (which led to lower oil prices and set the stage for a period of extended global prosperity), the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 1982 or the Saudi contribution to the fight against the contras in Nicaragua. And in the '90s, Saudi-American collaboration was instrumental in liberating Kuwait and laying the groundwork for the subsequent Madrid Conference, which brought Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians together to seek a permanent peace settlement for the first time.

Then came Sept. 11. Without doubt that crime stands in history as one of the most heinous and dastardly ever. The perpetrators of that horrible act -- 15 of whom were from Saudi Arabia -- shocked and saddened the average Saudi citizen. The condemnation from my leadership was immediate and comprehensive. As a country that has suffered at the hands of terrorists for the past 40 years, we understood some of the sorrow and anguish Americans felt that day. For me, it was an especially calamitous event, as I had devoted all of my working life to combating such crimes. It also brought back the pain and outrage I felt when my father, the late King Faisal, was killed in a terrorist attack.

As director of general intelligence, I had for some time regarded Osama bin Laden as a key intelligence target. When he embraced terrorism in 1994, my government took the unprecedented step of stripping him of his Saudi citizenship. In 1996 the president of Sudan offered to hand him over to the kingdom if we agreed not to prosecute him. We turned down that offer; we wanted bin Laden to face trial. Around this time, at the instruction of the senior Saudi leadership, I shared all the intelligence we had collected on bin Laden and al Qaeda with the CIA. And in 1997 the Saudi minister of defense, Prince Sultan, established a joint intelligence committee with the United States to share information on terrorism in general and on bin Laden (and al Qaeda) in particular.

A year after Sept. 11, I look upon my country and see many changes. First, extremism is widely condemned. Even many of our most radical citizens have begun to advocate moderation. And our leadership -- both the secular and religious authorities -- has vocally admonished those who continue to support extremist ideas.

Reforms are proceeding. Our press is increasingly open. There is frank criticism in our media of the government and social problems. In addition, our legal system is being reformed, and full legal representation of the accused has become mandatory. Police must now follow strict judicial procedures in issuing warrants, holding suspects and informing the next of kin when a suspect is held for questioning. Also, a top-level committee has been charged with reviewing and reforming our educational system. Private universities can now be established, in competition with government-sponsored education.

We have begun to issue identity cards to women, in recognition of their rights under Islamic law. These include the freedom to conduct financial transactions and establish businesses, among other things. In addition, women's education has been transferred from the religious authorities to the Ministry of Education, the same department that is responsible for the education of men.

All these developments, and others that I have not mentioned, have followed from Sept. 11. Many were underway before that day, but the horrific images of 9/11, and the threat that terrorism represents to all civilized peoples, accelerated our process of self-reflection and change.

Saudi Arabia has worked with the United States for the past 70 years. Both countries have benefited from this enduring partnership. Remember that we face the same threat: Bin Laden targeted Saudi Arabia before he targeted America. Al Qaeda has thousands of followers from more than 60 countries, including those of many U.S. allies. That he chose 15 Saudis for his

murderous gang, many of whom, he boasted, did not even know the ultimate goal of their mission, can only be explained as an attempt to disrupt the close relationship between our two countries.

There are those in America who condemn all Saudi Arabians as uncivilized, close-minded and barbaric. But such blanket accusations are not worthy of the American people. Let us refuse extremists the victory of undermining our partnership. Instead, let us remain strong, and, whatever shortcomings we see in each other, let us confront them and overcome them together in a spirit of mutual respect and openness.

The writer was director of the Saudi General Intelligence Department from 1977 to 2001.